

# LOUDOUN YOUTH STUDY 2006

## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

PREPARED BY GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

### **Background**

Loudoun County, Virginia has a long-term commitment to providing a high quality of life for its youth through implementation of a range of forward-thinking initiatives. The Advisory Commission on Youth (ACOY) was established as a citizen group approximately 15 years ago, with direct reporting to the county's Board of Supervisors. Through 2004 and into 2005, a planning process for youth activities and services was conducted by a broad-based steering committee that included discussion groups and development of a vision and goals document. The Youth Advisory Council (YAC) was established in 2005, with broad youth representation from throughout the county. Under the leadership of the county's Board of Supervisors, and with a desire to enhance services and resources to assist its youth with their expressed and identified needs around selected issues, Loudoun County initiated a range of activities. The Loudoun Youth Initiative (LYI) office was established in 2005 to provide coordination of these initiatives. A range of activities and services for youth have subsequently been implemented, including an annual Step Up Loudoun event, a youth-oriented web site, Youth Fest, and other events and services.

In 2006, a formalized needs assessment and strategic planning process was designed and formalized with a Memorandum of Understanding with George Mason University (Mason). Through the range of approaches undertaken with this needs assessment and strategic planning process, a detailed Report of Findings and accompanying Appendix have been prepared by Mason faculty and staff. These materials document the needs assessment and strategic planning activities conducted in close coordination with the county's LYI office.

The ***Report of Findings*** includes five sections: (1) Introduction, with insights about the historical context of Loudoun's youth initiatives; (2) Overview of Community Youth Development, including published results from community based youth strategies; (3) Loudoun County Highlights, with an overview on a range of issues relevant to youth; (4) Methods and Findings, with results from the three approaches used; and (5) Recommendations, with suggested courses of action for county leaders, a strategic plan, and potential Loudoun-Mason partnership details. This ***Executive Summary*** provides highlights from the report, with primary attention to the findings, recommendations for county leaders, and a strategic plan.

Overall, leaders in Loudoun County are to be commended for their vision and planning efforts. This research foundation serves as a sound basis upon which to help the county's youth initiatives move forward. The insights gained through this assessment process suggest that the foundations, activities, services, and processes undertaken in Loudoun County are cutting edge and are among the best youth-based approaches in the nation.

### **Loudoun County Highlights**

As with many counties and communities throughout the nation, Loudoun County has a range of services and resources available that are designed to provide for the maximal health, safety, education, and personal development of youth within the county. However, unlike many counties and communities in the nation, Loudoun County has experienced tremendous growth in a very brief period of time. The county has transitioned very quickly from a rural, somewhat distant suburb of Washington, D.C. into a fast paced, highly affluent and integral suburb of the nation's capitol. With this transformation have come shifts in population, congestion, diversity of residents, education, affluence, and many other factors. Also with this transformation have come changes with youth needs and issues facing them, as well as a growing desire to better address these needs.

The county's population has increased nearly 5-fold since 1980, with close to 100,000 residents added in the last five years; currently, the county has more than 85,000 households. Accompanying the growth in size is the change in diversity; while the population in 1980 was overwhelmingly white, this is currently two-thirds of the population. Increasingly, the adult population is more educated; in 1980, approximately 25% of adults had a Bachelor's degree, with this level at 56% now; in 1980, 25% had less than a High School diploma, with a current rate of 5%. The affluence of Loudoun County residents is documented by the fact of a higher per capita income and median household income than Virginia as a whole through the past 25 years. The current median household income in Loudoun is \$98,483, a level nearly twice that found statewide and among the highest in the nation.

# Project Research Methods

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The research approaches focused upon gaining a greater understanding of the nature and scope of issues surrounding youth in the county, thus providing a sound basis for immediate action as well as for planning future activities. These needs assessment processes were designed so they could be replicated in the future, thus providing an opportunity to monitor the progress of the desired outcomes, as well as to assess new and emerging needs.

Three specific approaches were incorporated in the overall needs assessment process:

1. A **Telephone Survey** was conducted with a random sample of 616 households, and included special populations of youth as well as parents of middle and high school age youth.
2. **Focus Groups** with 104 youth were held in five high schools; the groups were divided by gender (males only, females only, and both males and females) and included 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students.
3. **Key Informant Interviews** were conducted with 9 county leaders in non-profit, business, government, and school settings; these interviews were conducted on the telephone using a semi-structured questionnaire.

This use of multiple methods - triangulation - incorporates multiple perspectives, thus offering a more comprehensive view and providing increased confidence in the results. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods further enhances the assessment by balancing population level data with insights gleaned from students and community leaders. All processes and instrumentation were conducted with approval from Mason's Human Subjects Review Board; the plan for the focus groups was approved by the county schools administration.

## Findings

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### Community and Youth Overall:

Overwhelmingly, youth and adults involved with this process report that Loudoun County is a desirable place to live and raise children. They note that the county is changing rapidly, in factors such as size, diversity, affluence, and congestion. These changes influence youth and family life, and shape youths' experiences and viewpoints. From an overall perspective, youth in the county are doing well. Support for youth programs is strong throughout the county, with a high value placed on youth engagement. Many county leaders have specific knowledge about how youth are doing. However, community leaders and youth tend to seek quick and simple solutions, typically with budgetary implications.

### Youth Engagement Opportunities:

Many youth services, activities and programs are already in place. However, safe, affordable, and accessible places for youth to gather are needed. Currently, youth are provided with some meaningful opportunities for creating their future, done in traditional ways. Opportunities to interact with adults are limited and structured.

### Youth Belonging:

Few feelings of ownership or a sense of belonging are found among youth. Belongingness appears to be fragmented, and follows traditional established boundaries such as school, subdivision, race and ethnicity, or income. Further, ties across generations are weak.

### Youth Respect for Others:

Throughout the assessment and planning process, the variety of youth engaged showed respect for others. There are, however, indications of an increase in violence among youth through the youth survey. Also, cross cultural issues appear to be percolating under the surface.

### Youth Healthy Living:

Overall, youth are making healthy choices for themselves. They value peer resources to be of assistance with personal choices. Relatively little attention is given to factors that promote healthy living among youth.

### Foundational Systems:

In Loudoun County, there are community leaders with vision and commitment. The readiness throughout the county for addressing youth needs in a meaningful way is high. However, a lack of public awareness of many of the youth resources that currently exist in the county is found. The county appears to be in a formative, transitional stage regarding youth issues, and would benefit from moving toward institutionalization. Ongoing assessments and evaluation processes are needed to sustain positive outcomes for the county's youth.

# Recommendations for County Leaders

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## **Recommendation Area I - Community and Youth Overall**

- County leaders would benefit from maintaining an overall perspective about Loudoun's youth, including the fact that, overall the youth are making healthy decisions and are doing well.
- Youth should be viewed from a holistic point of view regarding influences and quality foundations for life.
- The range of resources already existing in the county would benefit from an assessment to review their role and function, for potential involvement in non-traditional ways.
- It is important to create opportunities for positive things to happen, which may be done with limited or no funding.

## **Recommendation Area II - Youth: Engagement Opportunities**

- Actively engage youth in conceptualizing, planning and implementing activities and services.
- Identify a variety of traditional and non-traditional, safe and accessible places to gather.
- Keep the good activities going, and spread them throughout the county.
- Involve and hold accountable a broader group of individuals for the youth-based activities.

## **Recommendation Area III - Youth: Belonging**

- Loudoun leaders should explore with youth what they think it means to be a member of a community, and how community is valuable and is not valuable to them.
- Work with youth to promote welcoming neighborhoods and school environments, through a variety of structured and unstructured services.
- Identify ways for youth to feel a greater sense of "rootedness" within Loudoun County through efforts such as volunteer and service opportunities.
- Look for ways to promote dialog and interaction across age groups and with their peers.
- Reward youth and youth groups for involvement and for engagement.

## **Recommendation Area IV - Youth: Respect for Others**

- Promote greater understanding among youth about constructive ways of handling differences with their peers.
- Provide greater recognition of the variety and breadth of quality initiatives done by youth, by youth groups, and by other groups/organizations/agencies.
- Identify strategies to increase inter-generational dialog and understanding.

## **Recommendation Area V - Youth: Healthy Living**

- Promote healthy living, including knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, in a holistic manner, through involving all sectors of the community.
- Use marketing approaches and actively involve youth to promote the desired lifestyle behaviors.
- Increase awareness about the wide range of healthy choices that are already being made by youth.
- Identify a range of ways to best address drug and alcohol use from a continuum of care approach, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.

## **Recommendation Area VI - Foundational Systems:**

- Attend to institutionalizing processes, protocols, organizational frameworks, funding, agreements, and related factors for sustainability in the development of strategic plans to address youth issues.
- Actively engage marketing efforts, using traditional and non-traditional approaches, throughout the youth initiatives in the county.
- Systems should be established so that ongoing monitoring and assessment of the achievement of desired outcomes and objectives is achieved.
- Strive to identify, engage and reward an increased number of people, agencies and partners who support and invest in youth.
- Promote and reward collaboration and inter-departmental strategies.

# Recommended Strategic Plan

## **Goal 1 – ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES:** *Provide a wide variety of attractive and safe recreational, cultural and social opportunities for youth.*

- To prepare an inventory of current activities and services that directly or indirectly serve youth; this includes what exists as well as gaps.
- To utilize current spaces (public and private) that can be used for teen-focused activities, events and services.
- To identify potential new facilities that provide youth with safe, accessible and affordable places to gather.
- To develop and implement activities and services that are attractive to youth, will supplement existing activities and services, and will help to fill the programmatic gaps.
- To regularly communicate the variety of activities and services serving youth, with a clear audience being youth.

## **Goal 2 - BELONGING:** *Foster opportunities for youth to connect with people and places throughout the county.*

- To learn ways that youth view ‘community’ and ‘belonging’.
- To provide opportunities for involving youth in community activities and events.
- To develop and implement a range of strategies that welcome youth and their families to Loudoun neighborhoods, schools, local area and the county.
- To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. *(Note: This is the same as Objective 3 in Goal 3: Respect for Others).*

## **Goal 3 – RESPECT FOR OTHERS:** *Promote attitudes and skills helpful for quality human interactions within and across generations.*

- To increase youth involvement with and understanding of individuals and groups from a wide range of backgrounds (including race/ethnicity, income level, and region of the county).
- To provide opportunities to celebrate youth accomplishments of individual youth, youth groups, and youth-serving agencies.
- To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. *(Note: This is the same as Objective 4 in Goal 2: Belonging).*

## **Goal 4 – HEALTHY LIVING:** *Enhance programs and services to promote healthy decisions about oneself and one’s body.*

- To prepare a community-wide assessment of places, policies, programs, and services that promote and hinder healthy living for youth in the county; this includes what exists as well as gaps.
- To increase public awareness about traditional problem behavior (such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse, obesity, suicide, etc.) and ways in which these can be more effectively viewed and addressed within a healthy living context.
- To actively involve youth in the coordination of a range of community-based approaches on healthy living, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.

## **Goal 5 - FOUNDATIONAL SYSTEMS:** *Provide and promote systems, policies and approaches that are essential for undergirding and supporting the implementation of the four identified goals and their objectives.*

- To obtain the active involvement and commitment of a wide range of individuals, groups, business, organizations and others in the implementation of a strategic plan that promotes a true sense of ‘shared responsibility’ for Loudoun County youth.
- To ensure that systems and structures surrounding youth programs and youth development are institutionalized.
- To increase public awareness about the youth-oriented initiatives in Loudoun County, as well as about the opportunities to be involved in these and future initiatives.
- To promote and reward commitment to implementing activities in the strategic plan.
- To develop and implement accountability systems that monitor the strategies and results achieved through the strategic planning processes.
- To communicate the results of the outcomes achieved, as a result of the implementation of the strategic plan.

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### Prepared by GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

David S. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Education and Human Development  
Director, Center for the Advancement of Public Health  
703-993-3697 danderso@gmu.edu

Laurie B. Dopkins, Ph.D.  
Associate Research Professor of Sociology  
Center for Social Science Research  
703-993-1428 ldopkins@gmu.edu

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